

In the centre of Port Louis, the capital of the Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius, stands a statue of Adrien d'Epinay, the renowned forefather of the island's white minority known as Franco-Mauritians. For many Mauritians d'Epinay represents the resistance of the colonial elite white plantation owners to the abolition of slavery, and many islanders call for the statue's removal as often as they criticise the privileged position of d'Epinay's descendants. Nevertheless, both the statue and the white elite are still standing.

# Still standing: the maintenance of a white elite in Mauritius

TIJO SALVERDA

Mauritius was completely uninhabited until the Dutch settled there in 1598. They abandoned the island in 1710, and a few years later the French took it, imported large numbers of slaves from Africa and established a sugarcane plantation economy. The whites who settled during this period were the pioneers and main ancestors of the present-day Franco-Mauritian community. Adrien d'Epinay himself was born during this period.

However, d'Epinay mainly lived under British authority, as the British captured Mauritius in 1810, during the Napoleonic Wars, in order to establish a strategic presence in closer proximity to their interests on the Indian peninsula. Since the British were interested only in controlling the island and considered the well-established Franco-Mauritian elite a valuable asset, they allowed them to stay almost entirely on their own terms: they kept their land, elite position, culture and language throughout the entire British colonial period. As a member of this privileged elite, d'Epinay was one of the first advocates for freedom of the press and a democratic Mauritius the positive influences for which he is remembered. But when the British decided around 1830 to abolish slavery, he also successfully campaigned for financial compensation to slaveholders the negative influence for which he is remembered and which is often viewed as reflecting his own pro-slavery beliefs.

When slavery was officially abolished in 1835 and compensation paid by the British colonial government to the white elite for the loss of their slaves, the newly free left the plantations, leaving plantation-owners without labour. The elite quickly turned to another British colony, India, and indentured labourers arrived en masse to work Franco-Mauritian plantations. They were the island's present-day Hindu and Muslim community's ancestors, and it was during the British colonial period that the current population's composition was established: Hindus (52%), Creoles (28%), Muslims (16%), Sino-Mauritians (3%) and Franco-Mauritians (1%).<sup>1</sup>

After the Second World War, Hindus began to compete for dominance with the Franco-Mauritian elite. Toward the end of the colonial era, democracy, originally inspired by d'Epinay, became a more authentic notion as the true majority, Hindus, began to dominate politically. After nearly two centuries of hegemony, Franco-Mauritians were losing ground and had to accept the Hindu demand for independence. Franco-Mauritians fiercely campaigned against independence and wanted to remain part of the British empire, because they feared Hindu authority over the island. However, the Hindu-dominated pro-independence block won the 1967 elections and cleared the road for independence, although the



Colonial plantation-owners home, now serving as a museum. Courtesy Tijo Salverda

narrowness of the victory appeared to indicate general ambivalence over transferring power to the Hindu majority. In 1968 the British granted independence and left the island to its divided mishmash of ethnic groups.

### Land

Notwithstanding their loss of political power, Franco-Mauritians are still an elite, mainly because they still own what made them dominant in d'Epinay's day: land and the sugar economy. Franco-Mauritians control four of the five largest business groups and about two-thirds of the land devoted to sugarcane (which takes up much of the island). They also invested well. After independence new economic sectors emerged in which money originating from the sugar industry was heavily invested: tourism all large locally controlled hotel chains are in Franco-Mauritian hands – and textiles. Competition was more fierce in the textiles industry, and today in general Franco-Mauritians are far from the only ones involved in the private sector. They may control a substantial stake but, as succession and consolidation have limited the number of Franco-Mauritian families in control, it is not enough to explain how virtually an entire minority has maintained its elite status.

Franco-Mauritians have always been potential employers for all citizens because they create many more jobs than there are Franco-Mauritians. However, Franco-Mauritians have an advantage: Franco-Mauritian businessmen, when asked about employing their own kind in upper management positions, often refer to the benefit of a shared culture and an inherent trust emanating from familiarity with the employee's family. Consequently, Franco-Mauritians have had an historic inside track to management positions. But owing to a nationwide focus on merit and a higher education standard, more and more Mauritians occupy positions previously reserved for Franco-Mauritians.

During much of the colonial period Franco-Mauritians had the advantage of a qual-

ity education because they could afford to send their children to school. In the early 20th century, other ethnic groups began vying for enrolment in the country's most prestigious school, the Royal College in Curepipe. In response, many elites transferred their children to Catholic missionary schools, the best of which were dominated by Franco-Mauritian pupils. But the state gained control over these schools, so when competition for enrolment increased in the 1970s, Franco-Mauritians were forced to compete for admittance with all Mauritians based on merit alone. Yet again the elite anticipated this, and today the majority of their children attend a small number of French private schools, which are known for providing a quality education and, despite English being the country's official language, many other Mauritians also attend.

Because Franco-Mauritians have manoeuvred so well, securing the education necessary to maintain their privileged place in the labour market, others continue to perceive them as elite managers who favour kinship ties over merit when it comes to hiring. In spite of some changes, this perception is not far off from reality. On average, the Franco-Mauritian community is indeed well off, and when told this its members often defensively point to poverty in their own community, but it is hardly comparable to that of the country's other communities. Besides, those they point to tend to receive financial aid from wealthy fellow Franco-Mauritians.

### Love

Marriage is at the core of any minority's capability to maintain a distinguished group profile in a multi-ethnic society. Clearly, for Franco-Mauritians, marrying outside the community has never been well perceived and has often led to disinheritance and virtual banishment.<sup>2</sup> Skin colour was once the predominant marker of group identity and corresponded largely with class boundaries, thus marrying outside the community was considered marrying down. This hasn't always reflected reality owing to island-wide social stratifi-



Statue of Adrien d'Epinay with protest board saying 'guilty, condemned by history', Port Louis, Mauritius. Courtesy Tijo Salverda.

cation, but Franco-Mauritian endogamy is persistent – though marrying white foreigners is not considered a breach – because it still pays to be part of the Franco-Mauritian community. By marrying 'white' you keep your stake in the island's richest economic network and increase your chances for a prosperous life.

Because love does not always conform to economic reasoning, marrying outside the community is not completely unheard of. Furthermore, Franco-Mauritians are more conscious today of the racist connotations of their marriage politics and defend their marriage patterns by instead referring to class, which in theory leaves open the choice to marry 'outside'. In practice, however, it is still an anomaly, and not only because of the economic aspect. Love simply does not easily find its way outside the Franco-Mauritian community. Social life is strictly organised. For example, the community maintains several white-only sport and social clubs, like the Dodo Club.<sup>3</sup> The national rugby team is virtually all-white, as the only islanders playing the sport are members of Franco-Mauritian clubs. A nightclub catering to Franco-Mauritian youngsters tends to refuse entrance to anyone else. In these ways, the 'irrational' facet of partner choice is eliminated by the limits of social life: the elite tend to date the elite. This guarantees ethnic separation and intensifies the high visibility of whiteness in an overwhelmingly non-white society, which creates other problems.

### Persist or perish

The inescapable difference of skin colour that distinguishes Franco-Mauritians often self-defined as *blancs*, 'whites' combined with colonial history and income inequality is a recurring issue. Franco-Mauritians are the living vestiges of colonial injustice, and many islanders perceive them as the agents of its maintenance. During celebratory abolition commemorations every February, politicians do not limit themselves to calling for the dismantling of d'Epinay's statue; they also directly, and frequently, target Franco-Mauritian

wealth, its historic origin and its owners unwillingness to share it. They lament the advantaged position of d'Epinay's descendants and campaign for financial compensation for the disadvantaged position of slave descendants.

D'Epinay and his statue are easy targets, but his descendants are fallacious ones: while they may be symbolic of the injustice of slavery, there is in fact hardly any uninterrupted line of wealth among Franco-Mauritian families and most of their present-day businesses cannot be blamed for slavery. Nor is slavery the sole reason why many slave descendants are disadvantaged. It seems that politicians are sometimes more interested in scapegoating for their own electoral profit than in truly redistributing the island's unequal share of wealth, which only reinforces the sense among the elite that they have to stick together.

It is obvious that many factors influence the maintenance of elite positions in general, and Franco-Mauritian elitism in particular. Past economic privilege is crucial, but it is only a starting point; perpetuating privilege is the key, and the Franco-Mauritian drive to stick together culturally and socially achieves a degree of exclusion that is highly effective in maintaining economic privileges. In fact, not excluding themselves from other communities would lead to the ultimate disintegration of their own, at least as they have known it. For this elite – for this 1% – it is either persist or perish. ■

### Tijo Salverda

is a PhD candidate at Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit. [t.salverda@fsw.vu.nl](mailto:t.salverda@fsw.vu.nl)

### Notes

- Figures are approximate. They are based on the last official ethnic census, in 1972, which was abolished thereafter because, according to the government, ethnic classifications reinforced a sense of ethnic belonging, which was no longer seen as desirable in a 'new' Mauritius. Furthermore, the four census categories were a simplification of the actual ethnic groups. For instance, the ethnic category General Population referred to those Mauritians who had first arrived in Mauritius, of whom many were Catholics and whose members did not belong to the three, more clearly defined ethnic categories. Thus the General Population consisted of Creoles, considered the descendants of slaves, and Franco-Mauritians, considered the descendants of slave masters.
- Actually, endogamy is a common Mauritian practice, but its financial consequences differ accordingly from group to group.
- Other ethnic groups also maintain clubs restricted to their ethnicities. In all cases it is not officially sanctioned but rather the consequence of unwritten, yet commonly known and accepted, membership policies.